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ABSTRACT

A program of English instruction to speakers of other languages (ESOL) designed specifically for students with disabilities is described. The program is based on the Ulpan philosophy, developed in Israel to teach Hebrew culture to immigrants. It is operated by a private organization serving individuals with disabilities, in two Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) public schools, a large high school and an elementary/middle school for the visually impaired. Participating students are 5-19 years old, from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and with diverse literacy levels and disabilities, physical, mental, and emotional. English language material is presented in 9 units, each with a theme that is addressed continuously for about a month. Grammar is not taught overtly but within the context of language functions being learned. Instruction is individualized, and self-confidence is a central aim. The grading system reflects the expectation that each individual's contribution is valuable, regardless of proficiency level. Focus is on daily living situations and real communication needs. Field trips are taken after classroom preparation. The program's teachers also act as advocates for their students in both academic and nonacademic realms. Participating students' achievement rates have been high and their willingness to communicate in English has increased. A curriculum outline is appended. (MSE)

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Ulpan: Functional ESOL Immersion Program for Special Education Students
by Roger S. Frantz and Jane Wexler

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The Ulpan Program is a program of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) designed specifically to help students with identified disabilities overcome some of the hurdles they face so that they can participate and be included in the regular education process as well as in their communities and in the American lifestyle.

Ulpan is a philosophy of language immersion and culture inclusion. Ulpan was developed, and it is still used today, to teach Hebrew and culture to many immigrants to Israel. The Ulpan Program for special education ESOL students draws several ideas from the original philosophy, then adds ideas from current research and theory in the fields of special education and language acquisition.

The Ulpan Program is operated by Elwyn, Inc. Elwyn is a large, private organization based in Elwyn, Pennsylvania, right outside of Philadelphia. Elwyn has been serving the needs of people with disabilities for 142 years. Elwyn has sites in the city of Philadelphia, in Delaware, in New Jersey, in California and even in Jerusalem. Jerusalem Elwyn adapted the Ulpan philosophy to teach a special-needs population. Philadelphia Elwyn drew on the Ulpan philosophy when it was awarded Chapter 1 funding by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to pilot a special education ESOL program. It was decided that the Ulpan Program would operate in two Philadelphia public schools. Through testing and classroom teacher referral, the Philadelphia School District had already identified ESOL students at both these schools who required special education services and who were not fitting into the daily classroom and general school routine. The first school is one of the city's largest high schools. The other is the city's elementary and middle school for visually-impaired students. The Ulpan Program Developer/ Instructor assessed the English language skills of identified students at the two schools using a program-based assessment to determine which students might benefit from participation in the Ulpan Program.

Those chosen to participate range in age from five to 19 years old. Their ethnic backgrounds include Laotian, Haitian, Ukrainian, Indian, Palestinian, Russian and others. Some students are literate in their native language, while others have had no formal education in their countries of origin. In each Ulpan class, there are varied levels of English proficiency. There are a diversity of disabilities. Some students are learning disabled, others are mentally retarded, emotionally impaired, hearing and visually impaired. One student is totally blind and physically handicapped. These special education ESOL students can fall through the cracks and become excluded from school life very easily if not provided with special support services.

In order to address the needs of such a diverse group of students, a special curriculum based on ESOL and special education considerations was developed. A philosophical perspective for use in conjunction with the curriculum was also developed.

Students with learning problems often have trouble with retention of new material. One of the unique aspects of the Ulpan Program curriculum is that all the English language material to be covered is divided into nine units, each of which has a theme. During the month or so spent on each unit, student thinking is focused on the theme, and there is continuous review and reinforcement of material within the unit. This helps students learn and remember. For example, Unit 4 of the curriculum is entitled "Location." This unit covers locations, or places, including home and school, in a community. The names of items and people in these various places are covered. How to find a particular location on a map. How to use public transportation to get to a place. How to ask for and give directions for getting somewhere. The two Ulpan Instructors focus, and get student thinking focused, on the theme of location. Certain vocabulary, expressions and syntax, such as commands and preposition usage in this case, are

reviewed and reinforced for students.

The reference to syntax, however, may be misleading. Grammar is never taught in the Ulpan class. Learning-disabled, mentally-retarded and younger students have difficulty transferring rules to real-life communication situations. Therefore, material is presented from a functional language perspective. Ulpan students can take functional language vocabulary and expressions and use them directly to communicate in the Ulpan classroom, in other parts of the school, and outside of the school. In conjunction with the functional language, communicative skills, such as American body language, are taught. These skills help students know when and how to use the newly-learned functional language.

Vital to special education is individualization of instruction. This is potentially problematic when students are at significantly different levels of English proficiency, as is the case in the Ulpan classes at both schools. Sometimes, students are divided into separate working groups. More often, the instructors team teach one group of students who are at different levels. This can be done because another unique aspect of the Ulpan Program curriculum is that it is designed so that topics and concepts within each unit can be presented at up to four proficiency levels. These levels incorporate both receptive and expressive skills, and range from simple to more advanced language. The Program Developer/Instructor individually assesses each student using a conversational, program-based assessment before the student receives any instruction. The assessment is used to determine which curriculum level the student is functioning at, objectives at that level which the student has already mastered, and thus the objectives at that level and possibly at the preceding level which the student needs to work on. Students then receive instruction as a group in the various topics under the theme of a unit. During instruction, material from several proficiency levels of a topic is presented and used simultaneously. Individual students are expected to master only curriculum objectives at their pre-determined proficiency level. At the end of a unit, the Program Developer/Instructor again individually and conversationally assesses each student to determine progress actually made in those objectives. Most of the students are now in their second year of Ulpan instruction. While they are working on new objectives, at the level above those objectives mastered during the first year, they also get another chance to master objectives in which progress was made, but mastery was not achieved, the first year.

All these attempts through the curriculum to individualize instruction and encourage use and retention of the language would be much less effective if they were not carried out through the unique philosophical perspective which has been developed. This perspective requires the creation in the Ulpan class of a group cohesive, relaxed atmosphere which promotes self-confidence and use of English. It also requires guiding students in the use of the functional English they are learning in real communication situations, advocacy for students, collaboration between the Ulpan Instructors and other education professionals, and inclusion.

It is important in any language class to encourage comfort and promote the self-confidence of students using the new language. This is even more important for special education students who often suffer low self-esteem because of their disability or because of the effect the disability has on school performance. The Ulpan Instructors use several techniques to encourage comfort and confidence among students. The tone of the Ulpan class is informal conversational. Each class begins with casual conversation about school news, current events, any issues of interest to students. At the high school, where the students are in the Ulpan classroom two and a half hours five mornings a week, there exists the flexibility to allow these discussions to continue for as long as the students want to talk. Students contribute, of course,

according to level of proficiency. Lower-level students develop listening skills and pick up information from more advanced students until they are ready to contribute themselves. Even after the opening discussion, the relaxed, conversational format is carried over to many of the other learning activities. Another technique used to get students to talk in front of the class is to ask a student to act as "teacher" for a portion of the class. Role-plays are done on a regular basis, and every student is strongly encouraged to get up and act out a role. Finally, grades are given based only on general effort and oral and written participation. A student is sure to get a good grade if he or she works and participates at his or her individual level of skills and abilities. This grading system presents the expectation that everyone's contribution is valuable, no matter the level of proficiency.

One of the program's most impressive success stories is Savy, a learning-disabled student, who came to the program last year frightened, not looking at anyone, and having no friends. If she was called on, she would freeze, stiffening at the sound of her name. This year, Savy feels comfortable in the Ulpan class and has transferred this confidence to her regular education classes. She has the confidence to express herself to teachers as well as to newfound friends. Savy is now fully benefitting from the learning that comes with participation.

Last year, Phat's self-esteem was rock bottom. He was aware that he was not learning the language or academics. This awareness further hindered his ability to learn. Ulpan Instructors worked on his self-confidence, setting him up for success and letting him feel he could say or do anything in the Ulpan class. This year, classroom teachers report that Phat is participating regularly for the first time in their classes. He now even has the confidence to speak on the telephone, a difficult task for a student without full language proficiency.

Because Ulpan students, like ESOL students in most Philadelphia schools, form such a mix of language and culture backgrounds, the program takes advantage of the only common ground they all share - the need to use English to communicate and to understand what is going on around them. Thus the term "immersion program." However, students are not "submersed" in the English language. Rather, they are guided and supported in the use of the functional language they are learning in real communication situations. The open discussion time at the beginning of each class gives students a forum in which to employ the English they are learning in a protected environment. It also gives the Ulpan Instructors the opportunity to guide students in the use of the language. Also in the protective classroom, students are supported in using newly-learned vocabulary and expressions through a variety of more structured activities. The group of activities for any one topic employs all modalities. This way, the learning styles of all students are sure to be addressed. After a series of classroom activities, students are taken out of the classroom and into the community. With the guidance of the instructors, they apply their new communication skills in real situations. Especially for the high school students, who will be out of school in a few short years, these trips into the community are an integral part of the curriculum. One or two trips are taken per unit of instruction. This might sound like an expensive proposition, but many of the places visited, such as the local post office and the grocery store, are within walking distance of the school, and there is no admission cost.

You deserve a break today - what better fast food place to take teenagers but to McDonald's. But first, preparation in the classroom is in order. A short story was read about the beginnings of the restaurant chain. Open discussion followed about fast food at McDonald's. Picture dictionaries were used. Key vocabulary words and phrases to use were written on the blackboard and reviewed. Then role-playing on how to order. Play money was included so the students would be able to practice giving money and counting change. The students were ready.

The poor woman behind the counter at McDonald's was a little overwhelmed when she heard 15 different accents ordering hamburgers. Every student was beaming when they received their Big Mac, fries and correct change. One of the students has been in the United States for three years, and this was his first opportunity to venture out into an American restaurant.

After a guided museum tour field trip, a lesson was done on writing formal letters and thank you notes. Each student wrote a thank you note to the museum guide. The next step was addressing envelopes, and then off on a community walk to the post office. Students purchased stamps and mailed their letters. Most of the class had had no idea where the post office was located, or even what its functions were.

Taking community field trips is not the last step in this teaching process. Ulpan Instructors stress for the students to do things independently. After a field trip to the local branch of the library, some of the students began to use its services on their own.

Beyond the teaching responsibilities, Ulpan Instructors act as advocates for their students in school-related and other matters. Alvin wasn't satisfied with his Science class. He felt that it wasn't challenging enough. Ulpan Instructors talked to several administrators until there was a roster change. On the other hand, one student got an F grade on her report card. The class was totally inappropriate for the student. The Ulpan Instructors got the student transferred to a class where she could find a little more success. When Jeby wanted to get a part-time summer job, the Ulpan Instructors invited someone to come to the classroom and interview Jeby. He ended up having a wonderful summer experience working in a hospital. This year, all the high school students are interested in summer jobs. A speaker was again invited to talk about summer jobs that are available to these students. The class has already had discussions on issues such as the importance of carrying out job responsibilities and how to get along with an employer and fellow employees.

Advocacy is not an end in itself. It presents students with a model which most of them now follow to help themselves. Cathy searched out and obtained information about the SAT test. One student has gotten a schedule change by visiting the guidance counselor himself.

Ulpan Instructors collaborate with other education professionals so as to ensure that students receive appropriate services for their academic and other needs. They also attempt collaboration with parents so as to ensure that there is carryover of the benefits of school services to other areas of students' lives.

Jose is profoundly hearing impaired. He covered up his deafness so well, none of his regular classroom teachers throughout his school years knew of his disability. When he was placed in the Ulpan class, one of the instructors noticed the problem. Jose is now wearing two much-needed hearing aids and goes for hearing therapy twice a week only because of collaboration between the Ulpan Instructor, Jose's other teachers, the school nurse, psychologist, hearing therapist and Jose's mother. This collaboration also helps to ensure appropriate scheduling to plan for Jose's future.

Finally, Ulpan Instructors arrange for inclusion of Ulpan students with other students. This is a vital part of helping students to make connections with the greater school and community. Once a week, the Ulpan class joins a regular ESOL classroom. The regular ESOL teacher and an Ulpan Instructor team teach and have lessons together, and the students attempt to converse in English amongst each other. Field trips are an interesting mix of students. Sometimes the high school students are combined with the elementary-aged students of the other school, plus native English speakers as well. A fun activity was provided for the students of the two schools to meet each other. All the students introduced themselves by speaking into a tape

recorder. Then the taped messages were traded from school to school. The field trip was a great success because everyone wanted to meet the different voices of the taped messages. Students got along very well with each other, and they all managed to speak English throughout the day.

Now a summary of some of the key points. The Ulpan Program, run by Elwyn, is a special education ESOL program designed to address the needs of students with disabilities who come from diverse language, culture and education backgrounds. A specially-designed curriculum includes thematic units which facilitate learning and retention for special education students. Functional English is presented so that students can easily transfer the new language to real situations. Topics within curriculum units are presented at up to four levels, setting students up for mastery of objectives at their current individual levels of proficiency.

The philosophy employed in conjunction with the Ulpan Program curriculum has as its first objective the creation of a relaxed, group-cohesive atmosphere in which students will develop self-confidence. The philosophy holds that students should initially be guided in the use of newly-learned functional English in real school and community situations. Ulpan Instructors advocate for students. Instructors collaborate with other education professionals who work with Ulpan students and with parents when possible. There is inclusion of Ulpan students with regular education students.

The effect that Ulpan instruction has had on participating special education ESOL students is marked. The conversational assessment, referred to earlier, reinforced by daily classroom observation, is the tool used to obtain measurable student progress results. This assessment measures student performance in the curriculum objectives in which each student was expected to make progress. A determination is made as to whether a student has achieved only limited progress in an objective, whether the student has made adequate progress in an objective, or whether the student has mastered the objective. The average rate at which Ulpan students have made either adequate progress in or have mastered objectives is over 90%.

The assessment does not measure progress in more intangible areas, such as fluency, pronunciation, projection and confidence in the use of English, though Ulpan Instructors do evaluate student progress in these areas. The principal at the elementary/middle school in which the program operates wrote in reference to these areas, "[I]t is my pleasure to . . . tell you what a significant impact I feel the program has had on my blind and partially-sighted children. [A]s I meet and talk with my ESOL students I see an increasing confidençe and fluency. I am certain that this is a direct result of your program." Perhaps most importantly, Ulpan students often express, directly and indirectly, how they now feel confident enough to face and express themselves in new situations they regularly encounter both inside and outside of their schools.

Ulpan Program Curriculum Contents

I. Basic Communication
   1. Introducing oneself
   2. Introducing others
   3. Classroom language
   4. Function-specific communication
   5. Non-verbal communication
   6. Telephone communication
   7. Printed matter
   8. Natural speech

II. Identification
   1. Individual people
   2. Individual things and animals
   3. Time
   4. Weather

III. Quantity
   1. Groups of people
   2. Groups of things and animals
   3. Specifying number
   4. Specifying amount
   5. Quantifying expressions
   6. Comparing quantities
   7. Money

IV. Location
   1. Specifying location
   2. Community facilities
   3. Reading signs
   4. Following and giving directions
   5. Reading a map
   6. Using public transportation

V. Possession
   1. "To have"
   2. Specifying the possessor
   3. The body

VI. Feelings and Actions
   1. Expressing feelings, desires, states and perceptions
   2. Discussing habitual action
   3. Discussing action in progress
   4. Discussing action which will occur
   5. Discussing more than one action in a sentence
   6. Discussing action which occurred and finished
   7. Discussing action which occurred over time in the past
   8. Discussing action which began in the past and has continued to or has some effect on the present

(over)

VII. Ability, Necessity, Advisability, Possibility
    1. Expressing ability
    2. Expressing necessity
    3. Expressing advisability
    4. Expressing possibility
VIII. Description
    1. Describing people, places and things
    2. Comparing people, places and things
    3. Describing feelings and actions
IX. Career Planning
    1. Career options
    2. Finding a job
X. Special Projects